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4

The Urgency of (Not Necessarily) Policy-Oriented Research: the Example of Power Devolution and Natural Resource Management in North-West Pakistan

*Urs Geiser**

Abstract

Research needs to be policy-oriented. But at times, researchers need to take the liberty to undertake 'policy irrelevant research' (A. Zaidi)—i.e. to use a research space within which policies themselves and their underlying assumptions can be critically questioned and debated. The present paper argues for such intellectual space taking the example of decentralization and power devolution. At the level of policy-orientation, researchers for example can study the performance of related ventures, in order to recommend potential improvements to the policy-makers. At a more basic level though, researchers need to ask for the pre-conditions that make decentralization and power devolution such a powerful discourse today. Among others, this leads to the question of state-subject relations.

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The Research/Policy Gap Re-visited

The notion of the *research/policy gap*[1] is indeed a very powerful label—a label that serves to order and judge what researchers do (or not do), how far their research outputs are 'relevant for society', and, last but not least, whether researchers are worth the money spent on them by 'society'. Interestingly, the notion of the research/policy gap is not only called upon in the arguments of policy makers and practitioners in state departments or donor-supported development projects, but is often internalised by researchers themselves in moments of critical self-reflexion. Especially research that takes place in so-called Third World countries is called upon to be policy-relevant. Regarding Pakistan, we are tempted to quote Zaidi (2002):

> There seems to be an obsession with 'policy relevant' research in Pakistan. Particularly for economists, and not them alone, there is the need to determine what role they can play in the 'development of the country' and how they can contribute to the 'country's development'. In the context of Pakistan there seems to be no research in the social sciences that expands the spectrum of knowledge and ideas, and Pakistani social scientists are primarily in the 'business of giving advice'. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as policy irrelevant research in the social sciences in Pakistan.

The present paper does not deny the fact that research should help to 'improve' policy, and through that, contribute in a constructive and supportive way to better social, economic or ecological development—but it advocates for additional research space that is not directly linked to policy in a utilitarian way, for 'policy irrelevant research', a research space within which, for example, policies themselves and their underlying assumptions can be critically questioned and debated.

To illustrate this argument, the example of an ongoing policy debate is taken, i.e. *Devolution of Power* as announced by General Musharraf in late 1999. Within this broad debate, the example focuses on decentralisation in relation to the use and management of natural resources, specifically forests, in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).[2]

The Example of Devolution of Power and Forest Management

The management of forests has, basically, to do with three main issues: (i) *How* the forest resources under consideration should be used, for what purpose, and by whom (a process generally labelled as policy formulation); (ii) then to *decide* on a specific procedure of how the forests should be used in the agreed manner; and (iii) the subsequent *practicing* of the decisions taken—a process labelled as policy implementation. In all of these three basic steps, various groups of people are (or should be) involved. A very popular typology distinguishes between the *state* and its functional line departments, the *local people* or communities (or citizens), the *civil society,* and (specifically so in southern contexts) the *donors*.

The thinking on how these societal entities are to collaborate in policy formulation, decision-making and policy implementation has considerably changed over time.[3] Taking example of forest management, a dominant discourse[4] for a rather long period of time argued that the state is the custodian of this natural resource in the name of the people and the nation as a whole. The state's respective agency (in this case, the NWFP Forest Department) was thus mandated to manage the forests directly as a state property. To enable it to fulfil this mandate, it was equipped with respective policies, laws, rules, management tools, enforcement

powers, finances and person power. Early development projects by foreign donors (e.g. FAO support to the Pakistan Forest Institute in the 1960s, or the Swiss supported Kalam Integrated Development Project—KIDP—in its early phase) supported this position and provided the state agency with additional finances, trained the available person power, and worked on the improvement of management tools such as forest inventory techniques or Working Plans.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, forest resources continued to be under severe stress, when looking at indicators such as forest area loss or the degradation of forest stands. This led to a process of re-considering the dominant forest management paradigm. Increasingly, the Forest Department's role (to manage forest resources in the name of the people) was questioned. To improve the (forest's) situation, more direct involvement of 'the people' themselves was proposed. Thus, 'local communities' became a key *stakeholder* group (a development notion emerging during this period of time), as did the Forest Department; both stakeholders were to improve cooperation and participation in view of saving the forests. Initially, donors mainly led this debate and only later some sections of Pakistan's civil society joined. As a consequence, the newly emerging paradigm—internationally labelled as CBNRM or Community-based Natural Resource Management—was tested within the context of (protected) donor-supported forest management projects.[5] The project staff for example *created* local bodies such as Village Organisations (VOs) or Community-based Organisations (CBOs) as platforms for interaction with the local communities.

This indeed led to some success stories, but in many (or most) cases, such local level organisations fell dormant, or vanished altogether, when the projects—and thus their donor-driven nurturing—ended (see e.g. Geiser 2000). This was the case with a number of projects by around the mid of the 1990s. In addition, a new set of questions was raised, mainly focusing on the issue of VOs' and CBOs' accountability, and whether such groups indeed were to be considered as being entitled to represent local interests.

In the late 1990s, this led to (among many other reasons) a new revision of the dominant thinking regarding the societal interplay for forest resources management. The need to involve 'local communities' was maintained. However, this involvement should not be spontaneous or informal—as practiced in spatially and temporally limited donor-supported projects—but should become more formalised and institutionalised by reforming the *existing overall governance structure,* 'enhancing the influence of ordinary people over development policy and its implementation' (Manor 2000). This *reform of policy planning, decision-making and policy implementation* should give local-level organisations their due position in governance (through the devolution of powers to them) and, through that, increase accountability, legitimacy—and access to resources.

Power Devolution: Discourse and Practice

The earlier *community-based natural resource management (CBRM)—discourse* thus shifted to a *devolution of power—discourse.* As Ribot (2002:5) remarks: 'Democratic decentralization reforms present the opportunity to move from a project-based approach toward legally institutionalized popular participation. (...) a shift from externally orchestrated direct forms of democratic inclusion to representative forms of democracy under elected local authorities.' In Pakistan, it gained enormous momentum with the coming into power of General P. Musharraf in late 1999. Again, though, the new discourse became strongly advocated for, and supported financially, by donor organisations.[6] Formulating a discourse (such as the one on devolution of power) is one thing, translating it into practice is another. Such *translation* does

not happen in a linear manner, but more often in a multitude of ways that at times may re-enforce each other, but more often than not will be conflicting. In our case example, there are at least two such (initially independent) processes of translation of ideas into practice, both with relevance to forests:

> The NWFP Forest Department itself became involved in what is called an *'institutional reform process'*. Its structure was perceived as still reflecting the old, state-centred understanding of forest management. This institutional structure, and with it the managerial objective of the department, should now be changed to accommodate the new discourse—not only in small islands of donor projects, but throughout the entire structure and space of influence of the department. Again, this 'reform' is donor-driven, mainly by a $42.6 million loan by the Asian Development Bank (ADB 1995) which started in 1996, supplemented by a technical assistance component with Dutch and Swiss grants. A core part of the institutional reform is the institutionalisation of legal arrangements that allow the Forest Department to explicitly collaborate with local communities in forest management—arrangements generally subsumed under the label of Joint Forest Management (JFM). As one of the results, new Forest Rules were notified (up to now for the Hazara region) that give legal coverage to such JFM arrangement.
>
> The *devolution of power process* announced by General Musharraf on October 17, 1999 (and formally operational by August 14, 2001) represents a second process of translation, by introducing a three-tier political system with elected Union Councils, a body at Tehsil level, and elected District Councils. This system is to replace the earlier state-centred administrative system built around the provincial line departments. Of special interest in our case are two arrangements: (1) At village level, people are encouraged to organise legally sanctioned and accountable *Citizens Community Boards*. These boards can, as an example, represent local interests regarding forests. And (2): At the level of the District Council, the Forest Department's representative is to be responsible towards the new district administration, and not upwards to the provincial department head (Chief Conservator of Forests) along the traditional line agency hierarchy.

Bridging the Research/Policy Gap: Different Readings

With the remarks made so far, the case is made for ongoing forest management reforms in the NWFP. Let us return for a minute to the theme of *bridging the research/policy gap*.

One reading and interpretation of this (assumed) gap (in our example) is that research has not contributed to the improvement of forest management, and that this contribution is asked for now. In other words: *researchers* should produce outputs that can be directly used by the *policy* makers—in our case Forest Department staff, the experts working under the Asian Development Bank, and maybe related representatives of Civil Society. Such research would for example have to focus on issues such as: how can the training of the Forest Department staff be improved so that it internalises the intentions of the reform process; which tools are best suited for such trainings; how can local people be convinced that the reform process is beneficial to them; how can round tables between state officials and other 'stakeholders' be organised so that the reform process is supported, etc. One benefit of such research is that funding might not be too difficult. Especially donors are often keen to employ (i.e. contract) the services of researchers in such policy-oriented research endeavours. This kind of policy-oriented research is indeed crucial and essential— but it may not encompass all the research required to *understand policy* (and the processes behind policy).

This paper advocates for a second field of research—a field that is (at a first glance) more detached from the question of its immediate usefulness for policy, a field of research that asks question *about* policy—and not taking the policy's intention for granted from the onset. In

other words: researchers should take (and should be enabled to take) the liberty to ask questions that are not immediately useful according to the judgement of 'policy makers'—research that helps to equip researchers with the reflective knowledge and insights required to enter into a critical dialogue with policy makers, policy deciders and policy implementers. This view of a *(not necessarily) policy-oriented research* is illustrated in the following by returning to our example of institutional reform processes and their implications on forest resources in the NWFP.

Asking Research Questions: The Practical Level

Further above we argued that the thinking regarding the societal interplay in forest management has changed over the last decades. The presently dominant discourse can be summarised roughly as: *The livelihoods of local people, and with this the management of natural resources such as forests, can be improved and made sustainable by formally involving them in local level decision making, through the mechanism of power devolution.*

This statement can be read as a policy statement, calling for related policy-oriented research (with themes as those mentioned further above)—but it can also be read as a *hypothesis*—and a hypothesis needs to be tested and discussed using theoretical concepts and suitable methodologies, and should be approached from a more detached subjective perspective.

One way of discussing power devolution—as hypothesis—is to ask for the *conditions of success,* i.e. the issues that would, in principle, need to be in place and that need to work so that devolution of power leads to better livelihoods and resource use. As power devolution is a dominant discourse these days, efforts to translate it into practice are ongoing in many countries of the world—it is a *globalised discourse* indeed. Gradually, comparative studies are emerging that try to identify (with more or less critical distance to the subject matter) such conditions that make institutional reforms a success, or a failure. Based on a review of several of such studies (e.g. Brown et al. 2002, FAO 2002, Kälin 1999, Kälin 2002, Manor 2000, Ribot 2002, Sharma 2003), a preliminary set of twelve issues emerges (see Table 1).

Such *proposed conditions of success* offer entry points into the discussion of *power devolution as a hypothesis.* Research, then, has to analyse in great details (i.e. through the methodology of comparative case studies) the actual reality and practice (not the discourse) of power devolution that is presently going on in the NWFP of Pakistan. Through that, researchers have to *build up their knowledge and understanding* of the nitty-gritty's of this practice, the various forms it can take, the intended and especially unintended consequences, etc. Once researchers are equipped with these insights and understandings, they can, and have to, enter into a critical dialogue with those stakeholders that are shaping practice. It would be challenging now to debate the ongoing practice in the NWFP in the light of the above-mentioned twelve points—but paper space prevents from doing so. Therefore, a few examples shall do.

Accountability

Generally, accountability is asked for in the case of local organisations, e.g. CBOs and VOs vis-à-vis the state. But accountability also refers to the accountability of the state to local bodies. In the context of the forest sector institutional reform process for example, new rules were defined to structure the interaction between Forest Department (FD) staff and

Table 1: Proposed conditions for success of power devolution (based on various sources)

Conditions of success	Some explanations
Accountability	Locally elected representatives 'are more easily held accountable to local populations' (Ribot 2002).
Powers as secured rights	'Secure transfers [of power] can create the space for local people to engage their representatives as citizens. Transfers made as privileges subject people to the whims of the allocating agencies' (Ribot 2002).
Financial resources	Manor (2000) and Kälin (2002) refer to the importance of local authorities having access to sufficient funds 'and the possibility to use them autonomously' (Kälin 1999).
Adjudication	'Governments should establish accessible independent courts, channels of appeal outside of the government agencies involved in natural resource management, and local dispute resolution mechanisms' (Ribot 2002).
Flexibility	Local governments need the space to act with 'flexibility in natural resource management in order to use local knowledge, respond to local needs, and mediate among multiple interests' (Ribot 2002).
Skills and capacities	'... projectisation, or in broader terms, formulating strategies and solutions, is the essence of decentralised planning. For success, emphasis needs to shift away from detailed identification of problems to building expertise in looking for solutions' (Sharma 2003).
Civil society involvement	Local VOs or CBOs play an important role, but the '(...) current wisdom in democratic decentralisation is that for management of public resources such as forests (...), accountability should run from these groups through elected local bodies to the people' (Ribot 2002).
Address basic needs issues	Manor (2000) argues that the impact of decentralisation is greatest in the fields of health, education (and environment).
Address economic development	Kälin (2002) mentions that 'more local development through participation of citizens, including the poor' is an important expectation upon decentralisation.
Address natural resource management	'Tropical forestry provides a useful entry point for governance programs: (...) the high levels of income and other benefits which it generates; its local fiscal base; the centrality of issues of tenure and collective rights; and its importance in rural livelihoods' (Brown et al, 2002).
Fulfil minimal environmental standards	'Governments should shift from a management-planning to a minimum environmental-standards approach. Broad minimum standards [set by government] can facilitate ecologically sound independent local decision making' (Ribot 2002).
Pro-poor pro-minority action	'Central government intervention may be needed for redressing inequities and preventing elite capture of public decision-making processes' (Ribot 2002).

organisations of local people (such as Joint Forest Management Committees). These rules empower the FD staff to dismiss the committees in case of non-fulfilment of agreements. But there is no mechanism to ensure accountability the other way round, i.e. to empower local committees to hold FD accountable (a recent study for example revealed that the forest management plans 'developed jointly' between the FD and the local people, were written in English, and not the local languages). It appears that the envisaged Citizens Community

Boards (CCB) under the power devolution programme might contain provisions of checks and balances. However, up to now no indication was found that the FD would consider *their* JFM-committees to become such CCBs.

Allowing researchers to step back a bit from directly policy-relevant research thus shows that accountability is contested at various levels and between different processes of translating the devolution of power discourse into practice. It will also show how the FD 'handles' the accountability issues at district level: In principle, state agencies are now to be controlled by the district authorities. In practice, the FD has handed over its social forestry (mainly farm forestry) component only to such control. The more important—especially in economic terms—management of reserved and protected forests continues to be a departmental affair along the traditional line agency structures.

Flexibility and Minimal Environmental Standards

Have the two reform processes led to a situation where people can pro-actively address their concerns? In forestry for example: has the devolution of power enabled local people to play a more active role in forest management (local people of course always play an active role—though this is often labelled as 'illegal'). Has the Forest Department re-defined its role, i.e. to withdraw from direct forest management, to allowing local people more active involvement—while at the same time clearly *defining the space for local action,* for example by setting minimal environmental standards that must be met by local action? A closer look at field realities shows that only a handful of such participative schemes between FD and local representatives were going on at experimental level, and that the future of these experiments is unclear: In 2003, these experiments were taking place under the Swiss support to the Forest Management Centre in Peshawar, in the context of the ADB-led Forest Sector Reform Project; the Swiss project ended in December 2003, and the ADB projects is presently (early 2004) in the stage of winding up (both projects, by the way, witnessed a wide array of policy-oriented research).

Asking Research Questions: The Fundamental Level

Conditions of success offer a very interesting entry point into the debate of power devolution as hypothesis, and they can already provide a lot of learning ground. In addition, though, there may be a need to ask even further questions—questions at a more basic level. At this level, we should for example ask for the *justification of the hypothesis:* is it just the latest fashion in the development enterprise, or does it indeed address basic issues of the 'societal interplay'? What are the underlying normative concepts behind the hypothesis? Which images of societal power relations do inform the hypothesis? How are the basic categories of state, local people, civil society or donors understood, and their respective role in the policy process legitimised?

Such research questions are not directly policy-oriented (many will perceive them as 'policy-irrelevant')—but they are important for researchers to be asked. At the same time, though, they are sensitive. Asking critical and more basic questions can easily be understood as fundamental critique, i.e. searching reasons to reject the legitimacy of the power devolution discourse. In fact, there is a growing tendency in many quarters to find fault with the present efforts for power devolution. But the *asking of fundamental questions is not to be confused*

with fundamental critique—indeed the contrary may be the case: to be able to debate the emerging counter-trends to power devolution, researchers (among others) need to be equipped with the necessary arguments and knowledge—and the better the basic assumptions behind the hypothesis are reflected upon, the better various arguments can be supported or challenged. *Indeed, the more research questions are detached from direct policy orientation—the more important they become for policy debate.* One example shall suffice.

The Notion of the State

Devolution of power can denote a functionalist understanding of society. Local people (or citizens) and state representatives are the given entities in the national system. They are to continue their interrelations, but with a changed understanding of roles and functions (i.e. more powers to the citizens, less to the state). The system components of 'state' or 'citizens' are thus taken for granted. But how are these categories perceived in actual reality? Many forests in the NWFP are located in the Malakand Division. This division has recently (i.e. in the context of the devolution of power programme) been abolished as an administrative unit, but continues to be of importance as a unit structuring people's perception of the state. The division was created in late 1969 when the former Princely States of Dir, Swat and Chitral ceased to exist and were merged with the (modern) nation of Pakistan. In other words: not long ago, the region's understanding of 'the state' was different, i.e. the notion of the state was linked to the feudal powers of the local Nawab or Wali, whose authority was justified with tradition and religion. What was to become Pakistan was—at that time—an alien empire beyond the boundaries of the princely states. In the late 1969, this alien empire (which in the meantime has become the modern state of Pakistan) took over control.

De jure, thus, the region is part and parcel of the Pakistan nation state (though under the special status of Provincially Administered Tribal Areas PATA—a designation not abolished through the power devolution scheme). *De facto,* though, many people in the area (and not only the elderly ones) contest this reading. They continue to perceive 'the state of Pakistan' as an external force that for example competes with the locals for the control of the forest resources. As a matter of fact, the legal status given to the forests in the division by the modern Pakistan state is generally not accepted by the local forest right-holders. The representatives of the modern state are (often, though not always) experienced—at the local level—as Forest Guards that are joining hands with the timber mafia, or as bureaucrats that provide services against 'payment' only. How, then, is the notion of power devolution understood by the people in the Malakand Division? Who is *the state* for them, which power does the state practice in actual reality (as experienced by the local people), and what is the (local) meaning of the devolution of these powers?

These questions, though, cannot be answered, as such questions are not necessarily been asked. But they should be asked by researchers, researchers that familiarise themselves with ongoing academic debates for example using the notion of the local state (e.g. Harriss 1998, Fuller and Harriss 2000), or the debate on everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1985). Such research, though irrelevant for policy at a first glance, may provide key insights into an understanding of why a specific policy works, or why it does not work.

A Final Note

Researchers can bridge the research/policy gap by becoming knowledge producers for policy makers—this is very important at times. But researchers can also bridge the research/policy gap not by becoming direct knowledge producers for policy makers—but by becoming well-informed partners vis-à-vis policy makers in an arena of critical debate and dialogue. The core question then is, whether researchers themselves (and those who administer them) accept non-policy oriented research as valid—and, of, course, whether researchers are enabled (i.e. funded) by society to undertake such research, to train students with the theoretical insights and methodological tools required. A seemingly local and minor issue like forest use in the NWFP of Pakistan can indeed be an intellectually—and politically—challenging theme.

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Notes

1. The theme of the Sixth Sustainable Development Conference held in Islamabad, Pakistan, from 11—13 December 2003 was: 'Sustainable Development: Bridging the Research/Policy Gaps in Southern Contexts'. Central questions raised during this conference included: Who are the knowledge producers? Who raises the demands for knowledge production? What are the sites of knowledge production? Who uses such knowledge? Who benefits from new

knowledge? How can the research we produce in third world contexts be translated into effective policy for sustainable development (SD)? Is SD only a question of reorienting the research/policy connections? (from the conference homepage at http://www.sdpi.org/sdc_2003/sdcMain.htm; accessed December 2003).

2. Field research underlying this paper received support from the University of Zurich, and the National Centre of Competence in Research North-South (NCCR-North-South), with financial assistance from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).
3. A dominant arena for related debates is the field of Rural Development, which started with the advent of the modern development debate around fifty years ago (for a good overview regarding rural development see Ellis and Biggs 2001).
4. Regarding the notion of discourse, we follow Foucault, who understands discourses as processes 'which systematically organize knowledge and experience, and repress alternatives through their dominance' (Outhwaite et al. 1993). Discourses are 'a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs. (...)Discourse is (...) contained or expressed in organizations and institutions as well as in words; all of these constitute texts or documents to be read. Discursive fields overlap, influence, and compete with one another; they appeal to one another's 'truths' for authority and legitimation' (Scott 1988: 35f).
5. In the case of the NWFP, examples of such projects include the Dutch-supported Malakand Social Forestry Project, the Swiss-supported Kalam Integrated Development Project (KIDP, in its later phase), the German-supported Kaghan and Siran Projects, etc.
6. For Pakistan as a whole, see for example the Asian Development Bank's 'Decentralization Support Programme'; a 270 Million $ loan project that started in early 2003; see http://www.decentralization.org.pk. (Accessed January 2004).

   For the North-West Frontier Province see the 'Essential Institutional Reforms Operationalisation Programme' (EIROP), financed by UNDP and the Swiss Development Cooperation, started in early 2001; see http://www.eirop.org. (accessed January 2004).